

The Book of Psalms

St Bartholomew's, Sydenham Bible Study Group

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Introduction

The Book of Psalms is unlike many of the others in the Bible, in that it is not a linear narrative, but a collection of 150 individual units, each of which can be considered as a hymn, a poem and a prayer.

We start by looking at the idea of genre: if we are given a piece of text without explanation, how do we know if we are looking at an extract from a novel, an instruction manual, a recipe, a ransom note? We have to consider the content and the context.

We shall be reading a few especially well-known or often-used psalms including 1, 23, 32, 49, 51, 74, 103, 104, 139 and 150.

A quick overview of these to get us started:

Psalm	Categories	Theme and narrative	Imagery
1	1 st of Book 1; spirituality; 1&2 together are a theological introduction to the Psalter; Wisdom; NT correspondence: Hebrews;	Meditate on the law of the Lord rather than the advice of the wicked, for they will be judged.	Those who follow the law are like trees by streams, i.e. living water, yield fruit, do not wither. The wicked are blown away like chaff. Blessed – translating asere (cf makarios in Beatitudes in NT) – it's a deep happiness. The verb used for 'meditate' is also used for lions growling and doves calling – reading was not done silently. Torat yhwh – the teaching of YHWH or the Torah in the strict sense? Definitely not just 'law'. 'Scoffers' are arrogant and scornful, talking about things they know little about and not following through.
19	Book 1; descriptive praise/hymn; mentions creation; header "to the Leader, a psalm of David"; spirituality;	God's glory in creation and the law: The heavens praise God, his law is perfect, and the psalmist asks for help to avoid inadvertently breaking it.	"the heavens are telling the glory of God". God has set a tent for the sun, i.e. it is his, not a god. Set of verses with paired phrases e.g. "the law... is perfect, reviving the soul" each one has an attribute of the law and then what it does for us. "More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb". "Clear me from hidden faults". "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

23	Book 1; 'of David' i.e. in Royal Collection; 'I' psalm; psalm of shalom; psalm of Christ's Passion; liturgical usage: Easter; baptism; healing; funeral; song of trust;	God as shepherd and gracious host to the narrator and protector against enemies – a very personal psalm.	Lots of alternate translations here in this very well known psalm, e.g. still waters vs. waters of rest, restores my soul/life (nepes – in OT we don't <i>have</i> souls, we <i>are</i> souls), right (sedeq) paths/paths of righteousness (sedaqah) (important attribute of God is setting things right), the darkest valley/valley of the shadow of death (Heb phrase valley + salmawet – shadow or death), dwelling in the house of the Lord forever vs. my whole life long (Heb length of days – not eternal life). Note mention of anointing narrator's head with oil at the feast. God's love in v6 – hesed (love, mercy). (Hesed usually translated lovingkindness in AV – Authorized Version). God was seen as a shepherd and kings as his under-shepherd in much of the Ancient Near East. V3: for his name's sake, as befits his name. God as feast-provider – see provision of manna in wilderness and promise of milk and honey in Canaan.
32	Book 1; declarative praise/ thanksgiving; 'I' psalm; penitential; liturgical usage: Ash Weds; confession; words of assurance;	The joy of forgiveness . It is good to acknowledge sin and be forgiven, versus remaining silent and losing strength. The faithful will be delivered from times of trouble, if they learn how they should behave, and the wicked will suffer torments.	"Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." "I kept silence, my body wasted away." God rejoices in reconciliation and forgiveness: "you surround me with glad cries of deliverance." "Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding."
49	Book 2; header "to the leader, of the Korahites, a psalm"; spirituality; possible hint of resurrection; Wisdom;	The folly of trust in riches: The rich cannot ransom their own lives and will end in Sheol, as will even the wise, so don't fear enemies. People who make money are praised, but they will end up with their ancestors. Except: "God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me." (v15)	"My mouth shall speak wisdom" – the equal fate of good and bad, rich and poor, wise and foolish, is a key problem at this time, a "riddle" and a "proverb". "The ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice, that one should live on forever and never see the grave." As for the foolhardy, "like sheep they are appointed for Sheol: death shall be their shepherd", echo of typical imagery of God as shepherd. V12 and v20 identical: "Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish."
51	Book 2; 'I' psalm; penitence; heading states David prayed this when Nathan came and reproached him over Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11	Prayer for cleansing and pardon : Asks for mercy after wrongdoing, referring to being born guilty, and asking God, who desires a contrite heart, to enable him to change and to retain the holy spirit. Then	Many phrases used in liturgy and discussions of atonement are found here" "wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin", "you are justified in your sentence", "I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me" (OT hyperbole vs. doctrines of original sin or total depravity), "purge me with hyssop",

	&12); penitential; guilt; repentance; liturgical usage: Ash Weds; confession;	promises to teach others of God's ways, and to praise God, sacrifice without repentance is not pleasing to God, but at the end asks for restoration of Jerusalem, and then bulls are promised as "right sacrifices".	(people who had touched the dead were sprinkled with water from a hyssop sprig: Num 19:14-17), "blot out all my iniquities", "create in me a clean heart", "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise", "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise". "the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit" – need to be careful about what that might be. Also, it does end with a belief that after God restores Jerusalem sacrifice made in the right spirit will be pleasing again. Refers to city's walls being rebuilt: were there any walls at the time of David, when the city had only just been taken and the temple was not built? 18-19 may be a later addition. Sets of three: have mercy, steadfast love and compassion, vs. transgressions, iniquity and sin.
74	Book 3; a maskil of Asaph; community lament; dissonance;	Plea for help in time of national humiliation : Psalmist feels the people have been abandoned by God and recalls that they were acquired and redeemed by him and are his sheep (shepherd motif again), relates the sacrilege of his foes, God's creative power, the scoffing of the foes, and calls on God to do something. Detail of destruction of "your sanctuary" and also "all the meeting places of God in the land". Are these the high places? Usually put down to Babylonians in 586, or possibly Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC.	Very strong imagery throughout, "Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?" assumes God is angry or he would not abandon the people. Reminder of covenant and God dwelling on Mount Zion. Foes "roar" and "hack" and "smash" and create "clamour" and "uproar". God's power against the sea and its creatures (dragons), eventually feeding Leviathan to wild creatures (or perhaps sharks, seafaring men or desert folk). Much separating and dividing: "cut", "dried up", "divided", "established", "fixed", and also "broke" and "crushed" the monsters. Plea for action: "Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals." Asaph as head of temple singers appointed by David – or inheritor of his tradition/post? Moves from 1 st person plural ('cast us off') to singular (God my King).
103	Book 4; descriptive praise/hymn; "of David"; of theology; liturgical usage: words of assurance; Eucharist; funeral;	Thanksgiving for God's goodness : God forgives and redeems us, vindicates the oppressed, and has compassion on us (knowing how we were made, i.e. as creator). God as ruler of the cosmos. Thanks God for blessings received as an individual and also blessings on Israel.	Repetitions of "Bless the Lord, O my soul" and begins and ends with this as inclusio. "Your youth is renewed like the eagle's." "As a father has compassion for his children.." "As for mortals, their days are like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field." People are evanescent but God and his steadfast love endure forever. God's blessings on Israel: "He has made known his way to Moses."
104	Book 4; descriptive praise/hymn; of	God the creator and provider . God is in control of light, wind,	Similarities to the Hymn to the Aten; however, also references flood story: God is in control of the flood waters

	theology; liturgical usage: Pentecost; creation;	fire, heavens, water and floods, springs, plants, animals, times and seasons. Also the creator, he “set the earth on its foundations” and “made the moon” and Leviathan. Finishes with a prayer that the LORD’s glory may endure forever and sinners “consumed from the earth”.	and “set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.” God “wrapped in light as with a garment”. Reviews all kinds of natural phenomena and imagery including specific animals and plants and their behaviour: “grass to grow for the cattle,” “wine to gladden the human heart”, wild goats, coneys, young lions, all “look to you to give them their food in due season”. “When you send forth your spirit, they are created”. God is clothed in light.
139	Book 5; spirituality; (one of psalms of commendation); liturgical usage: healing; funeral;	God is inescapable no matter where we go or what we do, and knows everything about us, whereas we cannot comprehend him. Ends with a plea that God will kill the wicked and an assertion that the psalmist hates God’s enemies.	Starts, “O LORD, you have searched me and known me.” “Even before a word is on my tongue” God knows what we will do. Extended part on inability to flee him is possibly an admission that we sometimes want to do that, or just a warning to God’s enemies that they can’t? – are we reading in too C21st and individualistic a way here? “If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea...” beautiful expansive metaphors here. “It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” and “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance, In your book were written all the days that were formed for me.”- has been used to discuss free will. We can’t understand God: “How weighty to me are your thoughts” uncountable like sand.
150	Book 5; A hallelujah psalm (the imperative ‘praise’ at start of verses is from Heb. ‘hallelujah’); descriptive praise/hymn; 145-150 doxological conclusion to collection; liturgical usage: call to worship;	Praise for God’s surpassing greatness	In places: his sanctuary (God’s throne in heaven, or the Temple?) and his firmament; for: his deeds (a God who acts), his greatness; with different instruments. “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” There is lots of repetition to hammer home the message, and repeat the praise itself, i.e. it’s a doxology – it’s a self-reflective passage because it’s in the book of psalms, so should be read aloud as praise itself. It is also the final psalm and could be said to sum up the previous 149 – the key thing is to praise God all the time in every circumstance. There are shorter doxologies at the ends of Books 1-4. Moves through pattern of ‘who’ to “why” to “how”. “Everything that breathes” usually means humans only, but here it could be taken to include the other nations.

Some people like to read through the book of Psalms regularly, or dip into it to read or sing favourite psalms that speak to their condition at the time. Psalms have become very popular as they have a freshness and immediacy to their language, and almost any emotion we might be feeling about God or about our lives can be found somewhere in the psalms. Picking psalms by personal preference like this has the advantage that we know the territory, and know the psalm will be effective in helping us pray. There is a disadvantage that some will never explore the full range of psalms. Attending Morning and Evening Prayer or working through the psalms in some order will enable us to articulate prayers that perhaps speak more to other people at that time than to us, and to make sure our psalm/prayer life is balanced. Some psalms have obvious seasonal uses, or can be interpreted in view of Jesus' life or when he quoted them during his teaching, which provides another way of choosing to go through them.

Summary of history of psalms and their use in Jewish worship

We have some idea of the way the psalms were used in Old Testament times, but we need to be wary of jumping to conclusions.

Some important dates in Jewish worship history:

King David: born around 1040 BC, ruled Judah 1010 to 1003 and united Israel 1003 to 970. (1 Samuel 16 to 1 Kings 2)

First Temple: dedicated by Solomon 957, destroyed by Babylonians 586. (see Kings and Chronicles)

Second Temple: rebuilt by the exiles 538, dedicated 516. (see Ezra and Nehemiah)

(Third Temple: built by Herod around 20 BC, destroyed by the Romans AD 65).

Some sustained references to setting up the First Temple can be found in 1 Chronicles, and we shall examine a few of these:

1 Chron 6: 31-48; David appoints descendants of Levi for "the service of song in the house of the LORD."

1 Chron 16: 7-36: David's Psalm of Thanksgiving. The ark is placed in the tent in Jerusalem. David appoints some people to a combination priestly/musical ministry to sing to the LORD. A song to the Lord follows in the text, replicating many phrases from the Book of Psalms.

1 Chron 17: as David speaks to the Lord, there are lots of parallels with Psalm passages, e.g. 17:20, "There is no one like you, O Lord." Lots of passages and speeches summarise what God has done for people.

1 Chron 23: descendants of Aaron are priests “set apart to consecrate the most holy things”. Descendants of Moses and the Levites are “to do the work for the service of the house of the Lord,” and, “They shall stand every morning, thanking and praising the Lord.” (This may be a ministry similar to modern deacons, sacristans or lay clerks?)

Some of the psalms refer to how they and other songs are to be sung in the temple: when, with what instruments. E.g. 89, 92:1-4. We have some references to David’s skill as a musician and composer but it is extremely unlikely that he wrote all 73 of the psalms that bear his name in their final form: the Hebrew “of David” can be used to mean “written by,” “collected by” or “dedicated to.”

The Songs of Ascent were almost certainly used by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, and so would have been amongst the first Psalms that Jesus learned as a child.

History of classification of psalms.

Psalms can be classified into different types (remember our genre exercise in week 1). Experts differ about how they name and divide the categories, and which psalms they place in them, but despite this not being an exact science, it is still useful when searching for an appropriate psalm or trying to interpret one. You would not get 23 and 32 mixed up, for example: they are clearly about different experiences and emotions.

The point of dividing the psalms up in this way is to understand and use them in our faith, not just to create a dry classification system.

Some different types we might identify:

- Hymns or praise songs
- Laments
- Songs of thanksgiving
- Royal psalms
- Psalms of confidence (in God)
- Wisdom psalms
- Torah psalms

We shall look at some of these types in more detail later.

Five books

(What else came in five books?)

Psalms are divided into five sections or books:

1	1 - 41	Mainly personal
2	42 - 72	Mainly national - Temple choirs?
3	73 - 89	Mainly national - Temple choirs?
4	90 - 106	Public worship?
5	107 - 150	Public worship?

Each of these sections ends with a doxology.

The traditional Hebrew titles for the psalms are later than the psalms themselves. 73 have David's name, indicating a tradition that they were either written by him, dedicated to him, or collected by him. There is evidence elsewhere in the Bible that David was an accomplished musician and composer, e.g. 1 Sam 16: 17 – 23 or 1 Chron 25: 1 – 8.

There are some Hebrew words in these rubrics that we no longer understand e.g. Maskil or Miktam, or words which surely refer to a type of instrument, but we are not sure which kind.

Dating the individual psalms is very difficult, but the consensus is that some come from the earliest First Temple period (950 to 587), others from the exile (587 – 520) and the remainder from the return of the exiles to the inter-testamental period (520 to around 167). Manuscripts found at Qumran indicate that the whole collection had been finalised into its current arrangement by the time of the Maccabees in the second century BCE.

Wellhausen (1844-1918) called Psalms “the hymn book of the Second Temple” i.e. post-exile.

The Hebrew name is Book of Praises. The word Psalms comes from the Greek psalmoi, meaning music made on stringed instruments, from the instruments used to accompany them. The word Psalter for a collection of Psalms comes from the Greek Psalterion, the title given in the 5th Century by Christian writers to the Codex Alexandrinus.

Psalms can be used as a summary of theology – Athanasius called them “the epitome of the whole scriptures,” Basil of Caesarea a “compendium of all theology,” and Martin Luther “a little Bible.”

Hebrew poetry

Not only are we reading the Psalms in translation, but the original Hebrew concept of poetry was different to ours. If you ask an English speaker to define poetry they will probably focus on rhythm, and state that traditional poetry usually rhymes.

Hebrew poetry had a different set of rules.

They were fond of around three main techniques:

- Reiteration: the same concept is stated several times.
- Rhythm: English poetry rhythm tends to focus on syllables but Hebrew rhythm counts stresses or beats. There are often three in each line, two in couplets, or three then two for taunts or laments (qinah).

- Parallelism: the thought of one line is echoed and developed in the next. This could involve replication, antithesis or amplification. As the parallelism is often in two opposed phrases of one verse, it might make more sense to split antiphonal psalm chanting into verse halves, rather than odd and even verses.

There are also some secondary characteristics of Hebrew poetry:

- Assonance (use of similar vowel sounds, e.g. “Do you like blue?” in English).
- Rhyme (occasionally).
- Refrains: like choruses in English songs, but can appear much more often: Ps 136 has a refrain on every line.
- Word-plays.
- Acrostics: like a puzzle, selecting the first letter of each verse spells out a word, or each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. (For an English example, look at the hymn we sing on St Bartholomew’s Day.)
- Word-choices: Hebrew poems are often very concise, or terse (the opposite of our stereotype of “flowery poetic language”). Prepositions, articles and conjunctions that would be used in prose are often left out. “Ellipsis” or “gapping” means a verb has to be carried over onto the next line, where it is not written out again explicitly, e.g. Ps 148:46.

Poetry appears in many books of the bible, not just psalms, but Jewish grammarians used a more elaborate system of accents on Job, Psalms and Proverbs versus the rest of the OT, as though to mark them out as distinctively poetic. Notice that modern bible versions quite often print sections of other books, like Isaiah, in verse format. Excerpts of these songs are frequently used in Anglican worship, such as for canticles in Morning and Evening Prayer, as we shall see later.

Psalms of joy and praise

Some psalms celebrate the joy of worshipping God, others praise God directly. Psalm 150 is the last in the book, and sums up the whole attitude of psalms. Take a look at the summary of it in the earlier table. In fact, praise predominates in Book 5 of Psalms, although it’s present elsewhere, so the book as a whole ends on a note of positivity and a “Yes” to God despite all the lamentation. Psalms 113-118 are called the Egyptian Hallel and nos. 120-136 the Great Hallel. “Hallel” comes from the Hebrew word “hallelu-yah” – the shout of “Praise the Lord!”

Some writers divide up psalms which praise God for specific deeds, helping or healing the psalmist as an individual or saving the people of Israel from Egypt on a larger scale (e.g. nos. 9, 10, 18, 32, 34, 67, 92, 116, 118, 124, 129, 138), versus psalms which praise God’s actions in general (nos. 8, 19, 29, 33, 68, 100, 103, 104, 105, 111, 135, 136, 145-150). These shouldn’t be seen as rigid categories, however.

Psalms for celebration and worship

23 is another psalm full of praise for God, this time for his kindness and care to the psalmist. Although this is a very individual statement of trust in God, we think the “I” psalms were also used in public temple worship. As far as we know, the Levites in the weekly temple liturgy sang “I” psalms like 92 and 94 along with “we” psalms like 24, 48, 81, 82, and 93. Sometimes the “I” narrator may be the king leading worship at a festival.

The move between “I” and “we” can be useful today to remind us that these prayers have been said by millions of people across several millennia, enabling us to have a historical and worldwide perspective at the same time as seeing ourselves as unique individuals yet also connected to a whole.

89 is used in celebratory worship too, this time voicing hope and making references to the king and possibly a future Messiah.

There are many theories of how the First Temple worshipped. Some psalms appear to be written for festivals, especially pilgrimage festivals, with a particularly important one in autumn. There were probably three of these:

Passover/Unleavened bread	Mar/Apr
Weeks/Pentecost	May/June
Ingathering/Tabernacles	Sept/Oct

Tabernacles was called “The” Festival, and later evolved into the New Year and Day of Atonement. It followed six dry hot months, and was when the rains came and ploughing began. Sigmund Mowinckel (Norway 1884-1965) tried to identify psalms’ liturgical uses e.g. the theory of the great New Year Festival where YHWH was enthroned as king and the king played an important role in liturgical dramas. Today much of his theory is generally dismissed as overly speculative. We might question why the Second Temple retained these “royal” psalms when there was no monarchy any more – one possible answer is that they were interested in preserving the references to a future Messiah.

The psalms were read out loud with music, and perhaps danced accompaniments as well. There are unanswered questions with most psalms even when they seem to have a liturgical role, e.g. Psalm 24’s “Lift up your heads O gates that the king of glory may come in.” Who speaks which parts of the liturgy? When would this psalm be used? Other psalms have sudden changes in tone e.g. Ps 69 from v29 to v30 – was there a gap for a sacrifice, a blessing, a sermon, or an oracle?

Psalms of lament and dark emotions

Some psalms like 74 or 51 deal with darker emotions, and are often called “laments.” They cry out to God, sometimes accusing him of doing nothing, and

sometimes calling for vengeance on their enemies. Like most of the psalm categories, some seem to refer to sufferings of an individual and others to problems in Israel as a whole, although some move from individual problems to consider Israel's faithlessness too. There's often a reminder to God of his promises to look after people, and of his past great deeds, plus a hint that his reputation is suffering as his enemies insult him. Self-justification is often present: the psalmist may be claiming righteousness in contrast with people who do not even try to do what is right, but scoff openly at the law, justice and God.

The ideal state is one of "shalom," often translated as peace, but meaning far more than just the absence of war. It's a state of positive peace, wellbeing and alignment. Things which destroy shalom include the weakness and failures of God's chosen people, their sin and evildoing, foreign enemies and their gods, and possibly God's punishing or testing people.

God can bring restoration of shalom if asked: wrongdoers can repent, evildoers can be punished, and God can demonstrate his power over humans, other so-called gods, and nature.

There are some very direct curses in some of these psalms. Try reading Psalm 137 all the way through, (or 56:6-8)! We could respond to this in several ways:

- Historical approach: "They're an artefact of their time". At the time of Psalms, the Law allowed limited retaliation for wrongs done and instructed people not to bear grudges or take revenge. This was a great improvement on the free-for-all and unlimited feuds that preceded it.
- Psychological approach: people really feel this way, and it's better to have them express it safely rather than denying it. God can handle anything we can express including our darkest feelings about God or about other people.
- Justice approach: vengeance is to be handed over to YHWH, we should not get violent ourselves. God was seen as requiring punishment of evil at this time, as one "whose eyes are too pure to look upon evil."

Any one of these approaches to how psalms should be seen in the context of their time could lead to us deciding to censor them, either from all our services, or from services where we won't have the opportunity to explain our "modern" approach to them; or we might decide to leave the "difficult" verses in and assume anyone who is troubled by them will discuss them.

Another area of troubled emotions is penitence. Traditionally, there are seven so-called penitential psalms: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

In Psalm 51, God is asked to have mercy, steadfast love and compassion. There may also be several different kinds of wrongdoing, but the divisions are not always clear: transgressions (roughly speaking, rebelling against God), iniquity (going astray) and sin (missing the mark). Some OT passages seem to make a distinction between accidental sinning all the way up to the most serious, intending to deceive God as well as others.

There is also a distinction to be made between remorse and repentance: repentance is not about abhorrence for our actions or an emotional response to them but about admitting a wrong has been done and intending to change. Sacrifices occur in normal everyday worship and are not just an attempt to appease God, unlike other nations' sacrifices to their gods.

Psalms for instruction and theology

Spirituality is notoriously hard to define but might equate to a personal approach to connecting to the divine, concerned with our deepest desires for meaning, purpose and connection. All the psalms are about this, in a sense, but one set of them are more explicit about how to live life under God intentionally, and these are often called the Torah, Wisdom or Prophetic psalms.

Some psalms celebrate the Jewish Law: e.g. 19 or 119; and others have more substantial parts of theology: e.g. 103. These celebrate the joy of getting to know more about God from an intellectual point of view as well as having a long, ongoing relationship with God through prayer and worship.

Psalm 1 refers to psalms as a book to be read, meditated on and used for instruction, and is carefully chosen as the introduction to the whole book. It recommends getting to know and love the Torah as the way to live. Torah is teaching, guidance and instruction, not just a set of rules. God has already saved his people from Egypt, so these are instructions on how to live now that you are saved, not a code to follow because you are frightened that otherwise God will smite you.

Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the book, looks at love for the Torah from many angles. It is designed in 22 sections of 8 verses each, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Psalms like 103 explore our view of God. There is an emphasis on YHWH as one who saves and helps us.

One way of describing the difference between Hebrew theology and Hellenic theology is that God is described in the OT by means of word-pictures rather than exact words, e.g. "slow to anger," or "keeping steadfast love". Compare this with attributes like "omniscient."

God is seen and described by his saving works in history, in the real universe. This is different again from oriental mysticism. Worship of God is not merely worship of the natural world, harvest or seasonal cycles, as God is shown to have power over all these things (including the waters, a source of chaos and fear for the Jewish people).

There are sustained metaphors that crop up everywhere in the psalms: e.g. God as refuge and pathway. God is also seen as a shepherd – and many different roles of a shepherd combine in God's actions. This one word can make us think of a defender against wolves, of people's sense of vulnerability, God as the best provider. We can be misled by metaphors that don't apply in exactly the same way in our context, e.g. in Britain grass is green and long-lasting, whereas grass

in Psalms is short-lived – it’s a tropical country with a long dry season! British shepherds herd sheep from behind, perhaps with the help of dogs, whereas shepherds in the Holy Land led their sheep. Also, how do vegans feel about “God the shepherd”? How do people whose fathers were violent and abusive feel about saying “God the Father”?

There are open questions here: does the OT have anything as formal as a systematic theology? Some people see the main emphasis as the covenant, others favour salvation history and God’s saving acts. This is important in an analysis of Psalms as there are more direct statements about God here than anywhere else in the OT.

God’s many different names are also important in the development of Hebrew theology. We lose this to some extent in translation.

Jesus and the Psalms

Jesus frequently uses and quotes from the Psalms, and the evangelists refer to how some of the psalms appear to prefigure Jesus. Some of these Psalms are so associated with him that they seem appropriate to use for various parts of the church year celebrating his life, e.g. Psalm 22 on Good Friday.

The Songs of Ascent were almost certainly used by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, and so would have been amongst the first the Jesus learned as a child.

References to the psalms in the New Testament:

Psalm	Key point	NT Reference
2:7	You are my Son	Acts 13:33
8:6	Everything under his feet	Heb 2:6-10
16:10	Do not give me up to Sheol	Acts 2:27; 13:35
22:8	Let him deliver him	Matt 27:43
40:7-8	I delight to do your will	Heb 10:7
41:9	My close friend... has lifted his heel against me	John 13:18
45:6	Your throne endures for ever	Heb 1:8
69:9	Zeal for your house has consumed me	John 2:17
110:4	A priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek	Heb 7:17
118:22	The stone which the builders rejected	Matt 21:42
118:26	Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord	Matt 21:9

Early translations of the psalms

- Septuagint: translations into the Greek begun in Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE.
- Targums: explanation, summaries and translations of the Hebrew, some dating from the 2nd century BCE (cf modern concept of a biblical commentary)
- Vulgate: Latin Bible translation by Jerome, completed 405 AD, drawing on some earlier Latin translations, the Septuagint and other Greek translations. The Vulgate uses an earlier Latin versions of the Psalms, the Gallican Psalter, rather than Jerome's translation.
- Peshitta: The Bible of the Syrian Church, a 3rd century translation of the Psalms and OT into Syriac.
- Coverdale's psalter is used in the Book of Common Prayer rather than psalms as translated in the Authorized Version of 1611.

Psalm usage in Christian worship

Early Christians thought that the psalms (and other OT writings) prophesied Christ, and used them in public worship and private devotions.

Academic reading of the OT could be:

- Historical-critical: emphasises authorial intent, and historical context.
- Literary criticism: can appreciate the world of a poetic text "for what it is".
- Modern view: the reader is an active participant with a world "in front of" the text.

The Desert Fathers used to recite all 150 psalms every day, which took them most of the day. Early religious orders modified this so that all the psalms would be covered in a cycle lasting a week. One of the main duties of monks and nuns was to say the Divine Office, a cycle of prayers that included the psalms.

There were 7 daily offices: Lauds, the four "Little Hours" Prime, Terce, Sext and Nonne, Vespers at sunset and Compline just before the Great Silence, plus Vigils in the middle of the night. The idea for this comes from Psalm 119, "Seven times a day have I praised you." This practice punctuates time with a regular call to worship, to orient perspective and proportion towards God, and promotes non-attachment to personal life and assembly in community. Some individual religious also added private devotions to these 7 offices, saying the gradual psalms (120 -134) or the penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143) or both.

Early Christians famous in other contexts played a part in the history of early church use of psalms. Ambrose (337-397) was responsible for a Te Deum setting and psalm settings. Gregory I is said to have ordered that music for the mass be collected and written down, leading to the system of “neumes” being used for psalm singing instructions. In fact, this probably happened a few centuries later.

The Liber Usualis is a book of commonly-used Gregorian chants, which includes the standard eight reciting tones used in the early church and the Tonus Peregrinus, the ninth “wandering” tone. In musical terms, early Christians claimed that the Tonus Peregrinus developed out of Second Temple Jewish worship, see Psalm 114, but this is now generally seen as doubtful.

Medieval times and the Reformation

In late Medieval times individual prayer including psalms became a common practice amongst the laity, with early “primers” and “books of hours” being hand-written and then printed. The “Little Office” or the “Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary” became especially popular devotions, and laypeople often said Matins and Lauds grouped together as one office called “Dirige,” sometimes with the Psalms of Commendation (119 and 139) appended.

Gradually the Latin translations were themselves translated into the vernacular (English in England, French in France, and so on). As the Church of England emerged out of the conflicts of sixteenth century England and firmed up its identity in the seventeenth, psalms continued to be very important to its worship, both in spoken and sung liturgy. When Archbishop Cranmer and other reformers wrote the first English prayer books in 1549 and 1552, which evolved into the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, they created a Daily Office to be said by clergy (and optionally parishioners) based on the monastic seven daily offices. Both Morning and Evening Prayer had a cycle of psalms to be said on different days of the month. The translation of Psalms used in the prayer book is that by Miles Coverdale from 1539, which in turn drew on Tyndale’s bible.

There are also many settings of psalms from the sixteenth century onwards that are designed for small groups of family or friends to sing at home. “The Whole Book of Psalms” was the second most printed book (after the bible) between the time of Elizabeth I and the Commonwealth. In Shakespeare’s time the most popular instrument groups would be the six-piece English or Broken Consort and many part-books were created for psalms for these.

Modern times

In some churches, psalms were a constant part of the liturgy, in others they may have died out somewhat only to enjoy new popularity as people experiment with new forms of worship and revive old ones.

The nineteenth century evangelical current of the Church of England was responsible in part for Anglican chant moving out of cathedrals and into “ordinary” parish churches. The Oxford Movement also played a part in widening

use of psalms but focussed more on increasing the use of plainchant in AngloCatholic churches.

In the Revised Common Lectionary as used by most Church of England churches, including ours, there is one psalm assigned for each Sunday Eucharist. The psalm is printed in the lectionary with a suggested response to use with it, usually either a refrain or a key verse from the psalm itself. Sometimes the psalm is read by one person, just like the other bible readings, or a reader may say the main body of the psalm and instruct the congregation when to say the response. Solo readings may be especially appropriate for psalms of lament and trust. Choral readings can be used, with multiple rehearsed readers.

Generally, the psalm choice relates to the Old Testament reading for the day in question, or occasionally the church year, e.g. many different churches' lectionaries have Psalm 22 for Good Friday. Some psalms rarely feature in the lectionary and long ones are often truncated.

Musical settings of psalms

Alternatively, the psalms may be sung. When we get to musical settings of the psalms, we have to deal with the fact that the terminology used is not necessarily clear: different traditions and denominations may mean slightly different things by "metrical psalms" or "chant". We'll attempt to cover the range that exists here, with particular emphasis on how psalms are used in Anglican music.

A typical list of possibilities would include:

psalms as hymns, choir anthems, chant, including antiphons (responses esp. Gregorian chant), cantatas (voices plus musical instrument), material for solo voice and chorus, plainsong, metrical psalters, domestic psalters, Anglican chant, Gaelic psalmody and improvisation.

Chant can vary from a congregation singing a whole psalm, a cantor and a congregation singing alternate verses in a responsorial fashion, the congregation singing divided into two groups singing alternate verses or alternate half-verses (antiphonal).

Psalm tones and pointed text: you may see 8 note psalm tones with pointing marks in printed text. There will be 8 notes in 2 4-note sequences where the second is a development of the first, called the antecedent and consequent phrase. The first pitch or reciting tone is the note for the first few words, with three notes of movement at the end of the phrase. There may be pointing marks, * for the half-verse boundary, and a . above a syllable where a switch is made from the reciting to the remaining pitches, usually an accented syllable.

Anglican chant has psalm tones and pointing but with four part harmony and sometimes an organ accompaniment.

Gelineau psalmody is named for a Catholic liturgical reformer of the 1950s and is distinguished by a regular pulse maintained and accented syllables sung to

correspond with it, created for French but now used in English as well, usually following the Grail Psalter. There is usually a congregational refrain.

Plain chant has a more extensive pattern of notes at the end of the sequence, which sometimes varies from verse to verse. This has been used in Western and Eastern medieval rites.

Responsorial psalmody: psalms with congregational refrains or antiphons. The name can be used for any call and response pattern, but typically has a congregational refrain or antiphon with the main psalm sung by a cantor or choir. The refrains frame the psalm and play an interpretive role, helping the congregation to focus on a key theme of text, usually from the psalm itself but sometimes another relevant phrase.

Metrical psalmody is a poetic reworking of the text so that the stresses fall in patterns and can fit a hymn tune, and the psalm may also be reworded so that it rhymes. Many hymn writers have set and adapted psalms, including Watts' "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun" from Psalm 72. The Iona Community has produced several collections.

Psalm-based solos, choral anthems, and organ and instrumental music may be through-composed i.e. unique music is written for every phrase without repetition, so this needs rehearsal by a choir.

Psalms in contemporary and emerging worship: psalms can be used to identify with the experience of people new to churches. Charismatic use of psalms makes for intimacy with God with an emotional content, especially praise, but ideally making use of the other registers of psalms including lament, penitence and gratitude. Emerging church typically seeks some sense of mystery, and personal authenticity and intimacy. An easy way into psalm use in such a setting is for one person to read the words, perhaps over an instrumental backing.

Select Bibliography and Acknowledgements

A good introductory book on psalms is "***Psalms, an SCM Study Guide***," by **Stephen Dawes, SCM Press, Norwich 2010**. This will give you an overview of Psalms as bible study: understanding the text and classifying the psalms, with some discussion of use of psalms in worship.

Another book with more emphasis on psalms in liturgy is "***The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship***," by **John D Witvliet, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2007**. This would be useful for anyone planning worship or wanting to learn more about the different ways in which psalms have been used throughout history or by different denominations.

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